



## Research Partnership

### UP Projects & Queen Mary's University

Micro-community engagement in London's outer suburbs: Examining a practice-led approach to engaging with micro-communities in Redbridge

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on how a practice-led approach to engaging with especially micro-communities, and in a regeneration context, might be able to ameliorate what have been described universally as ineffective community consultations. Practice-led approaches are understood here as 'research in which the professional and/or creative practices of art, design or architecture play an instrumental part in an inquiry' (Rust et al. 2007). Whilst community consultations serve a purpose for local authorities and have progressively evolved since the early 2000s, the ways in which they are conducted is still often criticised for being at times tokenistic and sometimes 'after the fact'. A socially engaged practice methodology that is conducted before community consultation processes might be a way to consolidate and ensure effective community engagement in a regeneration context. The London Borough of Redbridge, with its mixed demographics and being earmarked for significant regeneration developments from 2015 - 2030, is used as the case study site. Redbridge represents one of the outer suburbs of London and includes what Ash Amin (2002) calls 'multiple publics', or the notion that heterogeneous, multi-ethnic and mixed-use suburbs have become the new normal as opposed to traditional notions of suburban life. In order to think through delivering more effective engagement in these areas this paper examines how designer Hefin Jones' methodology might have the potential to deliver a deeper understanding of micro-communities in a regeneration context. These methodologies therefore have the potential to provide an effective foundation for other types of community consultation. Jones's deep and exploratory engagement with three micro-communities in Redbridge acts as a case in point for opening up complimentary ways of engaging with micro-communities in London's socio-culturally complex outer suburbs.

## Introduction

This paper is about a practice-led approach to community engagement in the London borough of Redbridge. Specifically it seeks to address how approaches such as these might enhance community engagement in a local authority/development context; and as a way to complement and perhaps support the delivery of community consultations as a two-pronged process. Following in the footsteps of Rust et al. (2007), this paper will adopt a basic definition of what is meant by 'practice-led approaches' given the complex scope and spectrum with which this terminology can be applied and understood. Rust et al. (2007, pp. 11) state that by understanding the term as 'research in which the professional and/or creative practices of art, design or architecture play an instrumental part in an inquiry', it allows the term to be inclusive while setting a wide boundary<sup>1</sup>.

While community consultation is an important part of the process of how local authorities conduct regeneration and redevelopment interventions, it is notoriously difficult to do well and while local authorities have made significant changes to the ways in which they are conducted they still often end up being tokenistic exercises

that inaccurately represent the concerns of communities. Practice-led approaches that are intended to engage with communities, under the rubric of socially engaged practice, can be incredibly useful in enhancing community consultations. While socially engaged practice is not without its share of criticism, which will be discussed later, its overall aims are highly conducive to gaining deep insight into localities in a changing urban landscape. This is usually based on a level of trust gained through the process and which could lay the foundation for more focused community consultation methods.

This work is the result of a collaboration between: an arts commissioning organisation called UP Projects, a designer named Hefin Jones, and a research based project called Creativeworks London based at Queen Mary, University of London. UP Projects commissions contemporary art that explores heritage, identity and place. They engage with citizens of London, the UK and across the globe. Hefin Jones is a London-based designer with a socially engaged design practice. His work involves people in processes of creating new possibilities for their skills, culture, and locality. Creativeworks London was an AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) funded knowledge exchange hub based at Queen Mary University of London which included research on 'communities of practice' as well as culture led regeneration in primarily east London<sup>2</sup>.

The collaboration came about due to UP Projects' original plans to embed artists in the outer boroughs of London, in this case the borough of Redbridge, in order to capture the pace of change that communities are experiencing due to large infrastructure projects as well as rapid building development. In the midst of the changes that Redbridge seems to be experiencing the project aims evolved into one which sought to use practice led, socially engaged practice, approaches in order to identify what 'community' means. This resulted in the development of an approach with a focus on getting to the heart of what community means in a part of London that defies traditional conceptions of community. Hefin Jones's approach focused on three 'micro-communities' within the borough in order to get to the heart of their everyday lives - he concentrated on a wheelchair basketball team, a marquetry group, and a boxing club. And while this paper is not about these particular groups but about Hefin Jones's methods it can safely be stated that they represent much of the activities that take place in Redbridge. They are indicative of how mixed use and demographically mixed large residential areas in global cities like London are not only made up of villages but made up of a number of micro-communities (small and hyper small scale communities) engaged in their own activities. I argue here, that socially engaged practice projects such as these can be viewed as a way for local authorities to rethink community engagement (in the form of a deep consultation) along the lines of deep engagement **before** enacting traditional community consultations and well planned regeneration interventions - I would argue pre-proposal stage but if this is not feasible then at least at proposal stage.

This paper will: first, give an overview of culture led regeneration and the difficulty of community engagement and subsequently consultation; second, it will briefly discuss socially engaged practice as it is treated in the literature and flag its potential for use in a regeneration context; third, it will provide a profile of Redbridge; fourth it will describe the methodological approach as it was conducted and through the experience of Hefin Jones; fifth, it will outline the implications of this approach and conclude.

## Culture led regeneration policy and community

Culture led urban regeneration policy has become latched onto by policy makers with surprising speed over the past thirty or so years. This is due to a variety of well documented factors that have taken root since the 1970s including: deindustrialization, middle class flight to suburbia, changing work patterns, the development of out of town shopping centres, a rise in car dependency (Binns, 2005), and now the after effects of the digital revolution and its effect on working patterns as well as consumption. The result has been an ever changing urban landscape heavily influenced by the decline of manufacturing and heavy industry (Garreau, 1991; Lang, 2003; Soja, 1989).

In order to counter the socio-economic effects of decline policymakers have latched onto cultural policy driven renewal that has become termed culture led regeneration policy, through a discourse embedded in economic imperatives (Binns, 2005). The recessions of the late 1970s to early 1980s hastened a falling out of favour with old policies that centred on public 'cultural expenditure', to have its own intrinsic civilizing value, and thus becoming an end in itself (Ibid) (for a thorough and informative examination into past planning policies and their legacies in Britain see Kearns and Turok, 2000). According to Binns (2005), 'culture' was turned to as a means to regenerate the urban centres using market forces due to a boom in expenditure in leisure activities and cultural consumption. Importantly, culture included within it the notion of the utilisation of 'public art' (and all of the baggage that comes with this approach) as an 'investment'.

Since then cultural investment has become the key to securing a favourable image of the city in order to entice the private sector into building public private partnerships thus ensuring capital inflows from the private sector (Bianchini, 1993; Garcia, 2004; Matarasso, 1996). What took root was cultural policy that looked for a return on its investment. Due to certain perceived successes such as Glasgow being named European City of Culture in 1990<sup>3</sup>, and all the socio-economic investments and benefits that came with this (Garcia, 2005; Sharp, 2007), culture led urban policy has been driven on, expecting the returns on cultural investment to be in the form of newer jobs, larger profits and the regeneration of perceived derelict and deprived urban areas (Binns, 2005).

3 Beatriz García's influential publication in 2005 regarding Glasgow evaluates the success of the European Union City/ Capital of Culture programme as a model for culture-led regeneration by assessing the long-term cultural impacts of Glasgow's experience in 1990. These cultural impacts are measured using soft indicators such as media and personal discourses. While the paper makes the case for using these soft indicators as a way to evaluate such events it also convincingly emphasises the success of the model used. It emerges that the effect of regeneration on local images and identities is the strongest and best-sustained legacy of Glasgow's reign as City of Culture many years after the fact.



As part of this emphasis on investing in culture as a tool for regeneration, according to Jarvis et al. (2011), New Labour brought in a welcomed emphasis on the notion of 'community'. As Evans (2005) has stated, historically too little attention has been paid to those who live, work and play in the areas earmarked for culture led regeneration projects therefore a need arises for the inclusion of the local community in setting the criteria against which 'success' is measured. Davies (2009) states, 'substantial funding, its single minded focus on defined and quantified outcomes, its network of partners all working towards the same ends', ends up being 'counterproductive to the recovery of a self-generating and diverse local economy' primarily because of its linear structure and approach (Davies 2009, p. 339 in Jarvis et al. 2011 pp. 5). Community focused approaches, or so the logic goes, provides an antidote to tokenistic ones.

This said, Robinson et al. (2005) point out that focusing on 'community engagement' rests easier as rhetoric than reality. Community engagement is usually treated as an all encompassing term where its practice is obfuscated by the rhetoric surrounding its well intentioned adoption. This means that a number of approaches and methods are being used and christened as effective 'community engagement' tools. Most of them have both strengths and weaknesses and are further categorised as 'community consultation'. Community consultations in a local authority context means attaining engagement with a community and allowing the community to engage with concerns in order to facilitate consensus about proposed regeneration interventions. However there are problems with this approach. They all seem to treat community as either a hurdle that needs to be cleared or an entity that needs to be convinced. They are also usually placed in the hands of the community, in other words usually the community must organise its own consultation regarding concerns - the indirect and often inaccurate result being if no consultations are organised then no one has issue with upcoming plans. Moreover, and possibly most importantly, most regeneration schemes in the UK are already agreed upon before the engagement process even begins which re-emphasises the tokenistic critique that is often levelled at them and even though new guidelines in place by the government explicitly ask for this to be avoided<sup>4</sup>. It must be said that many local authorities have made significant strides in challenging this tokenistic approach. Sadly, this is often rhetoric as proposals are put forth prior to consultation in many cases and consultations are used to back end the projects. Methods like public meetings, workshops, focus groups, forums, flyer distribution, and web-based engagement are used to modify components of the already planned intervention; importantly even at proposal stage most planning works go through. These methods all have a large social component to them that should be able to provide communities with the information they need to be part of the planning and regeneration picture -and some local authorities, registered social landlords, and housing associations are able to pull this off. Often times they become ineffective by being used to justify already planned interventions - they become reduced to being tokenistic, cosmetic, and often times 'after the fact'. Moreover, since they are used to ask specific questions related to planning interventions they miss the very notion of the complexity of community and the recognition that asking one question to a number of stakeholders will invariably give you a number of different answers. Doing it this way means that consensus is rare.

Aside from community consultation being too late in many cases, a host of difficulties can cause real challenges to their implementation. According to Jarvis et al. (2011, pp. 6) these challenges include: 'limited community capacity, inadequate representation, limited specialist knowledge and skills, substantial time demands, friction between residents, a lack of trust of local government, and the pressure to achieve quick wins'. All of these challenges have large associated literatures in their own right hinting at their complexity; it is then no surprise that sometimes community representation in policy can end up being a tick box approach (Chatterton and Bradley, 2000; Taylor, 2003; Coaffee, 2004). As many studies have shown this results in the true involvement of community in regeneration schemes being 'more apparent than real' (Jarvis et al. 2011, pp. 6). It can be suggested then that the real problem behind community consultation lies in the way that communities are initially approached, understood and engaged with.

The problem becomes even more pronounced when one takes into consideration the changing character and make up of our modern urban spaces and places. Urbanist and theorist Ash Amin's (2002) contention is that the recognition of 'multiple publics' is vital to community understanding from a policy standpoint in the 21st Century. Essentially, Amin is describing a view of communities in global cities with large mixed ethnic neighbourhoods and mixed use economies - the notion of multiple publics speaks to this heterogeneity, this reality of advanced post-industrial cities. Larsen's (2013, pp. 408) contention is similar - that in order for effective and efficient community participation in urban regeneration to happen there is 'a need for an approach that more respectfully acknowledges that local communities exist, before the urban regeneration project comes rolling in with all its processes, resources and publicly paid labor power'.

Of course this requires a type of engagement with community that includes existing local voluntary, community-based and market-based actors, but also a recognition that maybe engaging with all of these actors at once is unrealistic - nuanced societies require nuanced methodologies and having a starting point with regards to conceptualising the problem is critical - it begins with our understanding of community which is something that art and design led approaches can assist with - more later. Thus not only must we begin by asking what we mean by 'community' when we speak or think about culture led projects and interventions in cities like London, but we must expand our methodological palette and menu of options regarding how we approach the notion of community in a time of what Amin describes as the existence of multiple publics. In this case I would argue that we expand our available options of engaging with communities, and this is where socially engaged practice can help.

### **Socially engaged practice and community**

Under the remit of 'arts and culture-led urban policy', the art (and artist) is understood as a tool that is used and commissioned by policy makers, in order to enact a perceived need for the reinvention and rejuvenation of, usually, urban neighbourhoods that have experienced some sort of socio-economic decline. According to Hall and Robertson (2001) in a regeneration context 'community-based public art' is seen to help do a number of things such as: developing a sense of identity, developing a

sense of place, contributing to civic identity, address community needs, tackle social exclusion, add educational value, and promote social change.

While this is usually well-intentioned there has been evidenced documentation of a number of problems with this approach (Cameron and Coafee, 2005; Ley, 1996; Sharp, 2005, 2007; Miles, 2005; Zukin, 1996). While these are widely documented in the literature, a core concern involves the disconnection between top-down arts and culture led policy projects and the communities that they are aimed at and which they are meant to represent (Sharp et al. 2005). In many cases there seems to be an inability to square the well intentioned aims of arts and culture led projects with the central identity of communities -this has been an historic problem. This disconnect could be attributed to the somewhat superficial role that public art projects are assigned to by local authorities -they are often not taken seriously enough. Arguably, this could be a result of the need for quick fixes and becomes especially problematic when taking into consideration the notion of multiple publics as described earlier (Amin, 2002). Thus it seems that one of the primary concerns for community oriented public art projects that are commissioned by local authorities is largely due to the way these projects are understood, treated and attributed. Thus regarding the methods used to engage with communities before commissioning a project either lacks depth or is non-existent because there is no room for the time it takes to do this (Hull, 2007). Thus coming to terms with how to approach and understand the very notion of working with and for a community is a challenge, but also thinking through the potential benefits of community based public art projects beyond the low expectation afforded by local authority bodies is a mindset that needs altering - but that is the topic of another paper.

Artistic approaches that allow for deeper engagement with communities prior to the commissioning of interventions are a way to effectively engage with communities - this is nothing new (and in actual fact is the bedrock of socially engaged approaches). This type of artistic approach began developing in the early-1990s under the banner of 'artist as ethnographer' (Foster 1995). It represents a paradigm shift in the way that artists work by focusing on community and collaboration as opposed to an artist's singular vision. This approach is primarily understood as a 'relational practice' and has been described in numerous ways: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, research-based art, and participatory art (Roche, 2006). This way of working is currently understood under the broad title of 'socially engaged practice' and has collaboration and community at its core. According to the Tate:

Socially engaged practice, also referred to as social practice or socially engaged art, can include any art form which involves people and communities in debate, collaboration or social interaction. This can often be organised as the result of an outreach or education program, but many independent artists also use it within their work.

As Kester notes, socially engaged art is distinguished by 'a common desire to establish new relationships between artistic practice and other fields of knowledge production, from critical pedagogy to participatory design, and from activist ethnography to

radical social work' (Kester, 2015). However, while socially engaged practices can result in empowering, inclusive and sometimes radical transformations it is important to remember that they are not quick and easy answers to enduring problems (Keidan, 2008). They are certainly not a singular answer to issues with community consultations which will be discussed later. According to Lois Keidan (May 8th, 2008):

The conflicts and contradictions between art and problem solving, the bridging of the gaps between privileged institutions and socially excluded groups, and the need to develop new and appropriate cultural and critical contexts for these practices are just some of the issues that still need to be unpicked.

There have been a number of critiques levelled at socially engaged practice - especially in the arts. The most poignant critical voice belongs to Claire Bishop (2006) who while supporting the need for relational practice approaches questions whether socially engaged practice sacrifices the aesthetic parameters that constitute 'art' in order to focus on collaboration. A second related critical question by Bishop asks whether socially engaged art practice guarantees a purely collaborative way of working with communities due to the fact that artists inevitably and instinctively infuse these projects with their own vision thereby removing the collaborative element all together - and what about ethics, again another paper. I would add a third fundamental critique which revolves around recognising the time it takes to access and build bridges with communities in order to fully see through these types of projects where funding body culture might in fact negatively affect these projects due to unrealistic project deadlines resulting in the need for quick delivery at the expense of understanding community dynamics. This results in socially engaged projects, as it has become adopted into mainstream policy under the rubric of regeneration, being guilty of the very same thing that old public art projects were in the 1970s and 1980s; namely, being disconnected from their immediate community and context because they do not have the means to do what they do properly.

Thus what is called for when combining community, art and design, and local authority interventions is a shift in the way that community based public art projects are approached, delivered, funded and seen through, supported by funding culture, in the way that community(s) is approached - a change that recognises the mixed character of communities today who are embedded in place, and the place making emergence of that dynamic as opposed to singular groups of communities.

In light of these concerns this paper is about a paradigm shift. Specifically it is about using a more nuanced socially engaged methodology in order to do three things: first, allow for a deeper understanding of the notion of community; second, allow for a way to add to our already existent menu of options on how to consult with communities in a way that takes into consideration the specific needs of multiple publics and conducted well before any proposal is written; and third, provide a way to understand communities in global cities that are in the midst of unprecedented change like Redbridge.



## A profile of Redbridge:

According to Watson and Saha (2013, pp. 2017/18), 'the outer suburbs of British cities have typically been seen, and imagined, as homogeneous spaces of traditional aspiring families, as cultureless deserts, or wealthy leafy dormitory enclaves, and as predominantly white'. Recent work indicates that this picture no longer represents the changing socio-demographic, economic and cultural shape of the suburbs, which have become increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity (Huq 2008; Nayak 2010), households (Local Futures, 2007), economies, environments, spatial forms, the range of cultural practices enacted, and new forms of cultural production (Watson and Saha, 2013). At the same time, new class identities are in the process of formation, and traditional class identities are increasingly fractured by ethnicity (Ibid). The London Borough of Redbridge exemplifies this type of change.

According to the 2011 Census the population of Redbridge was recorded at 278,970 and projected to reach over 305,000 by the end of 2017. The healthy life expectancy (HLE) at birth for Redbridge residents stands at 65.5 years for males and 62.4 years for females. 65% of the population are of working age (16-64). In 2015 net migration into Redbridge was 2915 people where most were international migrants. Redbridge is one of the most ethnically diverse local authorities in the UK. As of 2013, 62% of the population identify as Black and/or Minority Ethnic (BAME). 40.2% of the population of Redbridge were born outside of the United Kingdom, compared to the London average of 36.6% and the UK average of 13.3%. In 2015/16 54.6 people per every thousand were registering for new National Insurance numbers. According to the 2011 census the largest migrant population by country of birth was India, foreign born Indians represent 7.6% of the population; the second largest group was from Pakistan at 5.3%; and the third largest group was Sri Lanka who represent 2.1%. This being said, large numbers of people from Poland, Bulgaria and Romania represent the next three waves of internal migration from the European Union into the area since the 2011 census. Importantly as of 2015, the unemployment rate in Redbridge stands at 8% which is much higher than the outer London average of 5.9% and the UK average of 5.1%. In fact the only boroughs with higher unemployment rates are Newham, Tower Hamlets, Westminster, Barking, and Greenwich. The female employment rate in 2015 was 57.6% which is much lower than the national average of 68.6%. 10% of working age people in Redbridge have no formal qualifications.

Redbridge is earmarked for major redevelopment from 2015 until 2030. The Redbridge Local Plan highlights the importance of sustainable development in the specific circumstances of Redbridge, in accordance with national planning policy, and plans for the infrastructure necessary to support Redbridge's expected growth (RLP, 2015). Full details of planned infrastructure improvement/new provision are set out in the Council's Infrastructure Delivery Plan (LBR 2.21). A far higher proportion of housing growth in the borough is projected in Ilford and the Crossrail Corridor than South Woodford. This means that housing-led policy is driving the regeneration efforts in the borough, which follows a similar picture in most of London's outer boroughs.

2016). The statement sets out what consultation has been carried out in preparing the plan to date, and how this has fed into the Pre-Submission Draft of the Local Plan. It demonstrates how the Council have complied with consultation requirements as set out in its own Statement of Community Involvement, and the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012.

The consultation process involved four stages of consultation that took place in 2011, 2013, 2014, and 2015. These consultations involved: the distribution of leaflets in public places like libraries, putting up exhibition boards in certain venues, meetings were held with key stakeholders ( police, children's services, and primary care trust), and public notices were advertised in local papers. Comments and concerns were instructed to be sent to the council either online or using response forms<sup>5</sup>.

In conjunction with the public consultation process the Redbridge Local Plan also made provision for community involvement in the neighbourhood planning process. This was done through a Neighbourhood Forum - which essentially is the organising of groups in the neighbourhood to tackle specific concerns and specific sections of the plan. Interestingly, it places the onus of community involvement at neighbourhood level with the community as opposed to with the council. In Redbridge, a Neighbourhood Forum can be established by anybody, organisation or group of individuals, and must meet a set of criteria - see Table 1 below.

Table 1: Neighbourhood Forum Criteria. *Source:* Redbridge Council.

- 1 The aim of the Neighbourhood Forum must be to improve and promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of the defined Neighbourhood Area.
- 2 The membership of the Neighbourhood Forum should be open to those in the defined Neighbourhood Area - who live there, who work there, who are elected members for that area.
- 3 The Neighbourhood Forum should have a minimum of 21 individual members who - live in the Neighbourhood Area, work in the area, are elected members for that area.
- 4 The Neighbourhood Forum must have a written constitution.

Interestingly, the consultation process in Redbridge has brought up three interesting aspects of the RLP and regeneration in the outer boroughs in general. Firstly, the plan is now underway and some feel that specific aspects of the consultation process have been quite tokenistic thereby not leading to concerns being addressed. While a number of issues still exist the most pressing that came through the consultation process was the decision by the council to build on green space - specifically the areas of Oakfield and Barkingside. This has led to a campaign to halt the sale of these areas

<sup>5</sup> For detailed information on the consultation process go to:  
<https://www.redbridge.gov.uk/media/2317/redbridge-local-plan-presubmission-consultation-statement-july-2016.pdf>

to property developers<sup>6</sup>. This highlights one of the many real time problems with consultation processes that simply do not speak to the concerns of local residents and communities before outlining regeneration plans, but use tick box approaches in order to satisfy rules put in place by the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012. This highlights the tensions that have been emerging in these boroughs as pressure to build homes encroaches on residents and others. It also highlights how housing-led regeneration has become synonymous with developer-led policy.

Secondly, and interestingly, as Redbridge's demographic shifts and as Asians start to become the largest ethnic minority in the area, previous studies have shown that different generations of Asians have different priorities when it comes to a sense of place and sense of community. For instance where White residents are more concerned with green space, older Asian residents view their community much more in terms of family and friends as opposed to outdoor activities (Watson and Shah, 2013). This said, Asian communities have other concerns about what represents their vision and experience of community that do not get picked up by public consultation. For them, association to Mosques and Temples, shops and restaurants are far more representative of how they view their community - much more so than say green space or the provision of libraries (Ibid).

Thirdly, a large number of community groups do not engage with the consultation process. Many view it as alienating and find the process complicated and time consuming especially if most of the information is online and residents are required to search through complex html pages with links to pdf downloads. While London Mayor Sadiq Khan recently released a good practice guide for regeneration<sup>7</sup> which recommends residents take part in shaping plans at an early stage - the consultation process remains a common complaint where quite often residents are rightly cynical about the process. This, I would argue, takes some mending - and socially engaged practice might be the way to fix it.

## Hefin Jones

Hefin Jones is a Welsh-born, London-based designer with a participatory design practice. His work engages people in processes of creating new possibilities for their skills, culture, and locality. This specific project examined what the notion of community means in the outer boroughs of London, specifically Redbridge. Specifically Hefin engaged with three groups in Redbridge: a wheelchair basketball team, a boxing club and a marquetry group. Important to note that while this section will discuss some aspects of these three groups it is not primarily about them. Instead this section is about Hefin's approach to engaging with these groups. Through his engagement with them he was able to create a film that explored the notion of what community meant to each group. This project was originally commissioned as part of a larger study on the outer boroughs but evolved into being a standalone project funded by Queen Mary University's Humanities and Social Sciences Fund.

<sup>6</sup> For information on the campaign in Oakfield and Barkingside go to:  
<http://barkingside21.blogspot.co.uk/2016/06/oakfield-to-be-sold-for-housing-new.html>

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/housing-and-land/improving-quality/good-practice-guide-estate-regeneration>

NOTE: Important to note that this section might present 'the community' as a resource to be 'mined' as part of a social practice and consultation process - an object that is being used as a canvass for the socially engaged artist. This is not the intention nor is it the case. The idea of community as an object of gain is a problematic one that Hefin's approach does not adopt or condone. These sets of interviews were about the logical process of doing this type of difficult work and engaging with the nuance that it depends on, hence it had to be described in a procedural way, as procedural knowledge and procedural in process.

## Participatory Speculation

While the project aim and research question was quite specific it also allowed for a certain degree of exploration which meant that Hefin had to adapt his approach at times. Hefin's methodology has broadly been described by him as 'participatory speculation':

The way of working in previous projects have been founded by a process that I have roughly titled participatory speculation. This involves an immersive approach in an environment to understand the people, cultures, expertise, histories, material culture, and infrastructure. This knowledge is then re-configured with the involved people through the creation of artefacts, performances, and films, which provide the means to speculate on new possibilities for that environment.. That's the process - taking a place, reconfiguring it with the people from that place, generating new possibilities, and then seeing how that affects that same environment. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017).

Regarding the specific methodological tools that Hefin uses

That is a process of going and spending time in that place. Spending time with people very informally, often taking part in the same activities as them, speaking with the people to understand the place - really trying to do it in less of a passive and observant way and more of an active participatory way so understanding that place through actually going through the same processes and same activities as the people that work and live in that place. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017).

These types of methodologies are used in a number of ways by a number of practice-based artists and designers that conduct work that is socially engaged. Of course they are not exclusive to socially engaged work but borrow a great deal from the fields of Research Methods in the Social Sciences and especially the field of Ethnography. Importantly they are exploratory and usually ground up. An important component of this work is maintaining boundaries and subsequently knowing when to disengage, but trust is essential:

Yes I think communicating that you're not going to be there forever is important, and not create systems that involve them being reliant on

you. Communicating that this project has a time frame and these are your intentions, but there will be a time when you'll be gone and you have to maintain that critical distance. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017).

The notion of being an outsider also prevails in these types of projects but Hefin states that this should not be something to shy away from but to embrace:

I think I mentioned this idea of being an outsider or alien, someone who is completely unrelated to an environment and has no affiliation to the place. This opens up an interesting possibility because it allows you to move freely between groups and ensures that they're the expert about the place they live and you're learning about this place directly through their knowledge and experiences.. Sincerely showing endless enthusiasm and interest in what they do, that was enough to lead to their involvement. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017)

By indicating you know yourself as an outsider you are also showing your level of interest in the group. This then opens pathways of trust, which is the fundamental foundation of working in this way.

### Facilitating Participation

The development of Hefin's approach evolved as the project unfolded. However, he had to facilitate participation by approaching the groups in a way that would allow them to be comfortable in participating. This involved scoping and pitching the project at the beginning and then allowing the groups to have enough purchase of the project to ensure they wanted to participate:

So firstly we drew a map of all the different groups...obvious groups, more established community groups like recreational or religious groups and so on. From those we started calling and visiting different places. I think one of the issues when you're contacting groups is what it is that you are saying to them and what the project is. The people involved that you are speaking to have different vested interests, which they will project onto this project. Their own interpretation of it will affect how they communicate it to the rest of their group - and those will vary. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017)

Pitching a project is vital, and depending on how the pitch is understood determines the way that each group will engage. According to Hefin some might actually misinterpret what you are doing due to past experiences with engagement - usually due to experiences with the local authority.

Some will misinterpret it as the council doing something that could negatively affect them. As clear as your intentions can be when you're communicating what it is you are doing with different groups a big barrier can be previous experiences with consultation processes, being interviewed, etc. Unless it aligns with something they are passionate about a lot of times that process of engaging with groups can be



problematic because they will project onto the project what they think the function is which can be inaccurate. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017)

Gaining access essentially means gaining the trust of these groups and this is where Hefin's methodology seems to excel. There was no need to incentivise the group to be part of the project through financial or other means, instead Hefin's approach was open and clear enough that those groups who engaged with the project saw its merits straight away.

There are lots of different functions a project can have, if they can align with the groups, they need to have a buy in of some sort, there must be mutual benefit for participatory projects if you're not paying people, because you don't want to feel like you're just taking from them and taking their time for what you're trying to do. If it's for your own benefit, what are they experiencing that would benefit them as a group? It's so that the work isn't just participation in the way that you do the work but the intention and the output is participatory as well, and has a benefit for them beyond just the way it looks. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017)

Essentially allowing a project to be interpreted by the group means that the group can exhibit a type of ownership which can sometimes facilitate further engagement. Each group's reason for participating was different, this will be touched on in the next section; the main thing was allowing for these multiple interpretations but also making sure they were positive.

### Time and Adaptability

In many instances time is a determining factor in these types of projects with respect to level of engagement. Some groups take longer to open up than others. Regarding the Redbridge project, time was needed for Hefin to understand the groups that he engaged with, time was needed for the groups in turn to feel comfortable with the project, and it took time to create the film at the end of the project.

So time is important for different groups - for example the boxing group, I felt after two weeks they were comfortable enough to share with me things that the Marquetry group only shared with me after two or three months of intermittent visits. Different people have different times - there's no defined timeframe. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017)

There are inherent cultural aspects that affect how long a group might take to engage. As Hefin pointed out some groups take longer to open up than others even though they have tacitly agreed to be part of the project. Being part of the project does not mean that groups must grant Hefin or anyone else instant access. In fact it might sometimes be the other way round, where a tacit promise of engagement is given while granting no access - which sometimes happens due to cultural factors such as being too polite to turn down a project. Time can also be an indicator of how seriously

the project is being taken by both parties. If the approach to work with a group is insincere and tokenistic this is usually signalled by long spaces of time (sometimes years) between consultations and meetings.

Sometimes three months was too long. You have to understand what you are asking of them. The nature of these groups also made it a bit challenging, for instance some of them were quite transient and people who were part of them might not be part of them in three months. Say with the boxing group some of these kids joined up to stay out of trouble but one of them had personal issues that meant he couldn't sit in on the main event of the film. You have to shape a project in such a way that sudden lack of involvement doesn't impact it. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017)

The above example also hints at the importance of being adaptable in these types of projects. This means being able to complete the project aims when parameters shift, boundaries dissolve or events take place that might result in lack of involvement. Regarding the above statement Hefin was able to replace the missing participant which kept the project going while introducing a new and potentially interesting dimension.

Most interestingly Hefin's approach was able to uncover some highly nuanced aspects of life in Redbridge. The next section details how the groups might represent Redbridge.

### **Redbridge through the eyes of micro-communities**

As outlined above this particular project involved the use of an arts led approach to engagement in order to investigate the notion of community in the outer boroughs of London. By speaking with and engaging with three groups from the borough of Redbridge designer Hefin Jones was able to use his methodology in order to uncover some interesting themes regarding the notion of community in this part of London. These have implications as to the way we understand the outer boroughs as well as how these types of approaches might be able to deliver beyond community engagement in the form of particularly public consultations.

When asked for an overview of how the three groups might represent Redbridge Hefin Jones replied:

I think what we did was representative of the groups involved and you're never going to - with participatory projects especially - involve everyone. You are always going to involve someone but not everyone - you're never going to reflect the groups of people who are not involved in the project for example who will add another interesting angle. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017)

And this is the point, these methodologies are not meant to answer tokenistic and generalised questions about bounded areas like Redbridge. Instead their strength lies

in how nuance is captured regarding our way of understanding communities. Hefin's methods are not a surrogate for public consultations methodologies but represent a paradigm shift (one of many) and are a way to understand what communities and micro-communities prioritise. Through understanding these priorities, it can be argued that through understanding these priorities local authorities can take more informed decisions regarding redevelopment. When asked how his methodology differed / changed for this particular project he stated:

It was half of this participatory speculation model, here it was more purely focusing on understanding Redbridge. There was an element of trying to affect the groups, through offering members of groups insight into other members reasons for being part of that group - for example, my reason for being part of the boxing club is different to yours and actually we don't talk about these things, so it was a project that tried to create a platform that allowed people to share those different points of view and empathise with each other. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017)

This notion of engaging with people's reasons for joining these groups represents the core of a micro-communities approach in understanding areas like Redbridge because it illuminates what can be viewed as important to these groups. How then do these groups, in all their nuance and subtlety, represent Redbridge?

Do they represent Redbridge as fragmented groups? I would say there is definitely fragmentation. There are groups of different people who have focused interests and they happen in concentrated areas in different parts of Redbridge. They don't necessarily overlap - and why would they? They do however contribute to Redbridge as a whole, for example the boxing group, they feel as though they are playing a beneficial role through prevention of youth crime. So there is this notion of a greater good toward Redbridge. It's not so much a concern for community as it is for locality. An area. Similarly, with the wheelchair basketball it's about creating an attitude change towards wheelchair users around Redbridge. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017)

It could be argued that these activities are a way to increase the visibility of a micro-community in some sort of way. Local politics and micro-politics revolve around these types of activities and they are synonymous with the identity of place. Micro-identities then, are the lifeblood of localities, and when they are in tune with each other they represent a larger identity and subsequent community. When they are fragmented, and / or heterogeneous in nature, as they are in Redbridge, they might be seen in terms of localities.

Another important theme is the role of leaders. The boxing club views its contribution to Redbridge as the reduction of youth crime but also as a place where a sense of identity and belonging can co-exist. This is partly accomplished through the existence of leaders, who themselves represent the facilitation of these micro-identities. Just as the boxing club's identity is based on internal and external actions so too are the wheelchair basketball and Marquetry group. In their own ways they represent

the borough due to the need for activities in the absence of cultural activities and provisions which allow for a coming together of micro-communities outside of the everyday.

There are issues in Redbridge which some of these groups respond to for example one of the leaders in the boxing club stated that he wants to be a role model for young Muslim kids because he felt that they were being represented wrongly in the media. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017)

Another theme was the mistrust of local authorities. When asked if there seemed to be much cynicism towards the council:

Yes because I think a lot of groups have relationships with the council, for example I met with one of the groups and they had to run their group out of someone's living room because they lost spaces through the council. The places they need to congregated which were facilitated by local authorities before, those places are becoming harder and harder to come by so I guess a lot of the groups have their different experience of the role of local authorities and what they do for them. (Interview with Hefin Jones, April, 2017)

It can safely be suggested that through the eyes of these three groups Redbridge represents the place in which they live. This means that there are a number of concerns that need to be addressed and these concerns are the building blocks of these groups and by extension micro-communities. These concerns revolve around everyday human involvements such as making the locality safer, making it more accessible, and addressing the needs of vulnerable local residents. While Hefin's methodology was not designed to answer specific questions about the redevelopment and regeneration of Redbridge it nonetheless unearthed important components of what these groups thought of as important - and these aspects underpinned the groups.

The project did three things: first it allowed for deep engagement and understanding with three groups in Redbridge. By focusing on what community meant to these three groups Hefin was able to tease out and expand on interesting cross cutting themes and concerns prevalent in all three groups but also themes that were unique to each one. This shows that while Redbridge might be seen as a fragmented urban space regarding the notion of community, it is probably better understood through the notion of localities; secondly, it highlighted the potential for socially engaged methods to perhaps delve deeper into communities and micro-communities uncovering community concerns that may not be evident using traditional public policy, consultation methods; and third, it allowed for a conversation about how art commissioning organisations like UP projects can fit socially engaged practice into opportunities that are coming through developer-led initiatives and regeneration contexts - this last point makes up the bulk of the next section .

## Implications and conclusion:

Hefin Jones' methods included: facilitating participation, providing time for exploration, and adapting to any challenges facing the three micro communities that were part of this project. This approach is emblematic of socially engaged methodologies and importantly are not meant to answer tokenistic and generalised questions about bounded areas like Redbridge - instead ( in this case) they have uncovered what matters to some residents of Redbridge as opposed to the other way round. As stated earlier their strength lies in how the everydayness of being part of micro-communities can affect our understanding of communities that defy traditional definitions - especially within the context of a changing and shifting suburbia. Socially engaged methods are not a surrogate for public and community based consultations that are done well but they can ( if adopted and adapted in a way that does not put them into conflict with developer led opportunities) represent a paradigm shift in the ways that local authorities treat and approach fluid and shifting urban areas. They can be added to the menu of options that are available as long as they are adopted and conducted before community consultations take place. This is because of two things: first, trust in the process of working with local authorities needs to be re-established after decades of mishaps, mistakes and false starts. Many think that these areas have evolved singularly and organically without regeneration initiatives and meddling but the truth is that they have evolved hand in hand with regeneration schemes that date back to the 18th Century with the expansion of the urban land mass as it swallowed pre-Victorian villages like Redbridge. Secondly, community consultations often represent targeted interrogation of a specific issue. This is usually policy led which means that it is not bottom up. Engagement prior to this stage means that the community's parameters, boundaries, concerns and its very 'habitat' are known and subsequently humanised. This can then provide a strong bedrock for consulting on other matters - matters to do with the everydayness of Redbridge. Thus the place for such methodologies might sit alongside traditional community consultation methods but only if these are done correctly and in a way that is sensitive to their timing. Placing these two together would constitute a 'deep consultation' process which I would argue would reap substantial benefits. As outlined earlier most regeneration schemes in the UK are already at least tacitly agreed upon (even at proposal stage) before the engagement process even begins re-emphasising the tokenistic critique. Moreover problems can become exacerbated when one takes into consideration the changing character and make up of places like Redbridge. As shown the consultation process in Redbridge has confirmed this. Firstly, the results of the consultation were not listened to and the saga is ongoing; Secondly, concerns are missed through the consultation process being aimed at specific groups (or at least being accessible by those who can access it); and third, a large number of community groups are not engaging with the consultation process. In the meantime Hefin's work has shown that Redbridge is made up of a number of fragmented micro-communities that are dependent on internal leadership in order to make their concerns visible. These include granting more access to people in wheelchairs, more activities for young people in order for them to stay out of trouble, and more spaces for those that are older and perhaps more vulnerable ( this represents the Marquetry group even though this paper did not go into great detail here).



different angles – both of which are important and can perhaps be complimentary – maybe even symbiotic. Thus the project did two things: first it allowed for deep engagement and understanding with three groups in Redbridge. By focusing on what community meant to these three groups Hefin was able to tease out and expand on interesting themes and concerns prevalent in all three groups; secondly, it highlighted the potential for socially engaged methods to perhaps delve deeper into communities and micro-communities uncovering community concerns that may not be evident using traditional consultation methods. By combining socially engaged methods with traditional ones, and by doing it well, a potential arises for deep consultation processes that might be able to re-establish trust, replace faith in the council's activities, and re-energise how we think of art and design in the city.

A few more things need to be touched on. The results showed two things: first that in areas like Redbridge the notion of community is highly fragmented. Meaning that different types of micro-communities, while living in the same borough, have completely different needs. Moreover Redbridge is experiencing a large population influx as parts of inner London become more and more unaffordable adding to the community makeup of the borough. This has implications for local authorities and how planned regeneration interventions conduct important actions like community consultations since it shines a light on parts of the outer boroughs that were previously understood as being devoid of community activity. This issue is complex and would require an entirely new paper to address it – watch this space.

I have argued that this project shows how a practice-led approach (such as socially engaged practice) can enhance important components of culture-led regeneration policy; in particular how community engagement methodologies can be undertaken in a way that ensures real engagement with the community. This is especially salient in areas experiencing significant change or where there are particular challenges in terms of access to cultural provision.

Finally, I believe this work also highlights the benefits of new types of research oriented collaborations in order to inspire new models of partnership working. Importantly it also potentially outlines some ideas for how arts commissioning organisations like UP projects might be able to square the circle that is commissioning socially engaged artists and designers while at the same time collaborating with developer led initiatives and what often times a constraining funding structure. This would also need an entirely new paper to deal with, but at the very least we can start to have this conversation now.

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